

The Conduct of Life Demonstrates Cultural Hegemony in Reference to the Dominance of Men

Gender differences between men and women have been a part of the American culture for hundreds of years, as it has with many cultures around the world, including the Latina Culture. The idea that men are superior and women are inferior is all a part of the hegemonic construct. Maria Irene Forné's married characters, Leticia and Orlando, in *The Conduct of Life* (1985) represent this hegemonic force by illustrating how culture has shaped men to feel empowered to dominate women.

These hegemonic forces which we as a society follow are ever changing. However, most believe that gender inequalities date to our prehistory where men hunted for food and women stayed home with the children and gathered small food (Brannon 185). This idea follows the similar trend that we still believe today where men leave the house for work to provide for the family and women stay home with the children. After hundreds of years of having this same idea embedded in our heads, breaking gender inequality has proven to be very difficult; even so, many cultures are trying to create equality for men and women. "After more than twenty years of research and theorizing, most scholars agree that gender is socially constructed. Gender is a social institution, not a biological distinction, something that members of a social group collaboratively create, maintain and enforce" (Hollander 474). Hollander is saying that we as a people agreed that there is a rule among us that dictates the way we see others, which is the hegemonic dominant society. By referring to "others" he is referring to those from the inferior group that do not dictate what

the majority of the population should do and should be like. Also because this ideology is humanly created it also allows room for change. This hegemonic dynamic that takes place is more of an abstract phenomenon; one cannot really see how it is taking place, only that it is. It can be traced by one who has witnessed many years of differences in human behavior over decades. A similar idea and possibly more concrete to the reader would be a fad. A certain fashion suddenly comes into style and everyone agrees it's the new "thing." Then it quickly goes out of style somehow when an invisible power says it is right or it is wrong. Hegemonic ideologies are often enforced through generations of traditions in culture, education, and politics. In this day and age these ideas are embedded by means of media: internet, television, magazines, and plays.

As hegemonic forces relate to *The Conduct of Life*, we see how men have an overruling, overpowering, overbearing force over women in the play. Orlando exerts control over his wife, Leticia, throughout the play and it parallels the way society has viewed male and female relationships since the twentieth century when industrialization took place. However, cases of this discrimination towards women are still exhibited today. The institution of marriage between Orlando and Leticia reflects that of the social institution of gender. In the following dialogue Leticia reveals her feelings of the status of her relationship which supports the idea of what each gender believes their role is in a marriage:

LETICIA. He told me that [. . .] his sole relationship to me was simply a marital one.

What he means is that I am to keep this house, and he is to provide for it. This quote from *The Conduct of Life* epitomizes and encompasses Leticia and Orlando's whole relationship where the imbalance of emotion is evident and roles within the household are strict. Whereas Orlando has a career and Leticia does not, one can infer that she is to stay at home and do housework, since sentimental gender roles placed women there and it was a man's place to work and provide for his family. Martin S. Gertrude, in his journal article about sexual equality, demonstrated

how men are told by God that they are the superior gender and they get to decide how, when, and where a woman would work which was in the house cooking, cleaning, and caring for children (41-42).

Twenty years before Fornes had *The Conduct of Life* published, a congregation that called themselves “Las Madres” united in Latin America in the late nineteen sixties (Miller 11). Many women would silently protest around churches against their government that were abducting their own citizens, instilling a “culture of fear” in its own people (Miller 2). Perhaps Fornes wanted her audience to become enlightened and make connections between the way in which a dominant group (in this case the government which just so happens to be made up primarily of men) exerts control over the “other” group. By using a Latin American family, Fornes would be able to connect Orlando and Leticia as being a symbol or example for the way in which men gain power oftentimes through fear in order to control women. As Miller concludes: “in each case the particular dissenting response of the woman is rooted in the historical circumstances of her time and place, and in her understanding of her role as a woman, as dissent to the culture of fear in Latin America in the 1980s.” By agreeing that women are inferior to men and allowing them to exert their control and power for hundreds of years, women come into this world taught from childhood that they belong to a category of people that has a specific set of behaviors, thoughts, and norms to follow or else they would be considered deviant.

Throughout the play the reader can tell that Leticia fears her husband. While she is on the phone, the tone of her dialogue assumes a whispering volume so Orlando does not hear. She also is afraid of leaving the house until after Orlando has had a cigarette (Fornes 1350). While the women of the Latin American culture are known to adopt a housewife role, it seems as though Fornes has used such a family to bring to the forefront the idea that it is hard to break the cultural normative society of Latina women maintaining the domestic role while at the same time trying to shift the unbalanced gender based hegemonic ideology. Brannon states this culture-bound tradition more clearly: “The conflict that Latina women faced is rooted in their

culture and religion. Motherhood, sacrifice to family, and subservience to men are idealized values in Hispanic culture” (16).

This concept of the hegemonic dominance of men has been studied by many philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists for many years which is why we have numerous categories by which we can organize men and women concerning their place in society. These methods of conceptualization can be advantageous in the fact that they give us a clear idea of our past and how women were seen by men and to see how far we have come, but also disadvantageous in the fact that these theories are the reason why the conflict of dominance is an issue because it is still thought of as relevant to our society today since it is still being taught in schools. With these ideas still concerning us it is easy for people to get back into the habit of believing this is the way society has always been and should always be. Ideologies that defined gender roles as they were inclined to be followed include the Doctrine of Two Spheres which arose between 1820 and 1860, the Cult of True Womanhood which was relevant around the same time, and male identity role from the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies. The Doctrine of Two Spheres claims that “the belief that women’s and men’s interests diverge- women and men have their separate areas of influence. For women, the areas of influence are home and children, whereas men’s sphere include work and the outside world” (Brannon 47). This idea guides how men and women thought of each other and of themselves. Coming from a respectable authority figure such as a psychologist, both genders believed what they read about how each gender was meant to live their lives. In the beginning of Fornes’s play she illustrates this idea of men and women having separate interests when Orlando brings up hunting and Leticia is appalled at the idea of killing a beautiful innocent deer (1347). In summation of Brannon’s points in *Gender: Psychological Perspectives*, The Cult of True Womanhood was a categorical guide that judged women based on piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity and if a woman did not abide by these characteristics she was not seen as a true woman by her husband and the rest of her society. Submissiveness and domesticity have been illustrated countless previous times but in

relation to purity a man did not want a woman unless he was the only one she had been with even if the woman was not the only person the man had been with. Fornes demonstrates this episode when Orlando is demanding to know who Leticia has been seeing even though he keeps Nena in the basement and Leticia is aware of this (1356). In contrast, the male sex role identity categorizes males based on masculinity, success, status, toughness, confidence, independence, aggression, and violence (Brannon 48). Brannon also summarizes a notable psychologist, Karen Horney, on the reasons for why men belittle women. She states:

Men fear and attribute evil to women because men feel inadequate when comparing themselves to women [. . .] men go through life needing to prove their masculinity, and failures make men constantly vulnerable to feelings of inferiority. This resentment can lead men to attempt to diminish women [. . .] female feelings of inferiority are perpetuated by men's behavior toward women and by the masculine bias in society. (107-8)

From these psychological standpoints, the hegemonic power that society gives to men reiterates the fact that men control women, and not only control them but are supported for doing so. Orlando, being a lieutenant in the army and potentially being convicted of a crime he committed (which also shows man's need for aggression and violence as per male sex role identity) while working may be feeling pressures of inferiority in his workplace and because of this situation he is bringing his work home with him which causes him to lash out towards his wife, Leticia, and also exert his masculine sexual tendencies by controlling Nena, "a destitute girl of twelve." Another psychologist, Ellyn Kaschak, examines how the social structure establishes the roles that men and women are to play and in adhering to these roles women and men comply over time out of habit because, as Professor Brandesky states in lecture, more specifically Latina women are taught to be submissive toward their husbands and are therefore complicit in the reinforcement of their societal roles. Since society has given the power to the men, men believe that they can take women as their possessions

which allows them to exert their control over women however they please. Kaschak explains: “[Men] . . . [treat] women as extensions of themselves rather than as independent people. With this sense of entitlement, men tend to seek power and sex in self-centered ways that may be destructive to others, such as family violence, incest, and rape” (Brannon 111). Unresolved issues in a man’s past may encourage him to behave in this self-destructive manner. Of course we only know Orlando from what Fornes has allowed us to know which leaves room for interpretation on the reader’s part for reasoning why he rapes Nena and domestically abuses Leticia in multiple ways. Orlando himself points out the fact that his sexual abuse towards Nena is something he cannot control: “It is a desire to destroy [. . .] It’s my nature [. . .] I was born this way and I must have this” (Fornes 1353). Man’s need to seek power and sex is portrayed outright here; to destroy a hopeless young girl depicts power in that he has total control over Nena. Orlando feels entitled to exert his control over her when he says, “I was born this way and I must have this.” Many studies have been conducted dealing with domestic abuse and Johnson illustrates a specific kind of violence that is portrayed in the play.

In his article, *Patriarchal Terrorism and Common Couple Violence: Two Forms of Violence against Women*, Michael Johnson states that two perspectives are shared including the feminist perspective and the family violence perspective. When figuring out the motivation behind a man’s evoked abuse upon a woman, the studies were mostly based on survey questions from the victimized women. From a feminist perspective it was concluded that “the emphasis has been upon historical traditions of the patriarchal family, contemporary constructions of masculinity and femininity, and structural constraints that make escape difficult for women who are systematically beaten” (Johnson 284). Since Leticia does not have a job and therefore cannot save money in order to escape and leave Orlando she is stuck in the marriage with him and must abide by his rules. The family violence perspective focused their research surveys on “the instigating role of stress, and public adherence to norms accepting the use of some violence within the family context” (Johnson 284). As

Professor Brandesky notes, the Latina culture molds this acceptance of violence in the terms used such as “macho” which indicates men are taught and nurtured to be dominant and aggressive. Johnson defines patriarchal terrorism as “a product of patriarchal traditions of men’s right to control ‘their’ women, is a form of terroristic control of wives by their husbands that involves systematic use of not only violence, but economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics” (284).

Again, traditions are passed down from generation to generation and Professor Brandesky also introduces the idea that in the Latina culture, where women are taking care of the children primarily alone, it is the mothers that are “infantilizing” their sons to behave in this manner. Economically, Orlando subordinates Leticia by not allowing her to get an education and therefore making her remain dependent on him which supports his control and power but also removes from her sense of self and therefore leads to isolation. We can see how Leticia is isolated which is a form of Johnson’s patriarchal terrorist ideology because she will not leave the house until Orlando leaves the house (Fornes 1350). Leticia also is the victim of emotional abuse which is another tactic from Johnson’s power and control wheel that includes “putting her down, making her feel bad about herself, calling her names, making her think she’s crazy [. . .] humiliating her”. The reader realizes this on several occasions throughout the play including when Orlando calls Leticia “foolish” and “mad” and also humiliates her in front of their friend, Alejo, by insinuating that she is unintelligible (Fornes 1340). A very telling line introduces the battle between love and control with this husband and wife:

LETICIA. Do you think I’m crazy? - Because I love him?

Johnson has introduced the idea that men put women down in order to keep them at a subservient level. This undoubtedly makes women feel insufficient, powerless, and unable to fight to declare their own independence. Contradictorily, men want women to understand the world as they see it; they want women to think politically, justly, and intelligibly. However, the contradiction lies in the fact that men did not allow women to receive an education in the nineteenth century in order to gain the

knowledge that men expected the women to have.

Education was a way to keep women down and keep them from rising up. Gertrude touches on this subject written in her 1914 book, *The College Man and the College Woman*. She states that females are above average when it comes to undergraduate work but they have a “lack of power to organize facts in the light of the universal principles that bind them into systematic unity” (42). This article states multiple times that women are purposefully suppressed in the educational area for the reason that education only bolsters power. Women would indeed lack this sort of skill because in those days men taught college classes and men decided the curriculum and men granted scholarships. Since men are in control of who learns what, the contradiction in education is that uneducated and illiterate women can only benefit from what men allow them to benefit but men expect even more out of women.

When women demanded an education from men in the nineteenth century, much like Leticia demands of Orlando’s friend, even notable men do not see the point:

LETICIA. I want you to educate me [. . .] I want to study so I am not an ignorant person

[. . .] I’m tired of being ignored.

ALEJO. Why do you want to worry about any of that? What’s the use? Do you think you

can change anything?

The men who were known as intellectual and religious leaders thought of Margaret Fullers explanation that when women “in their usual unforeseen and unforeseeable fashion, made this demand for themselves against men- likewise a privileged class- the latter [. . .] conscientiously set in motion all the old forces of inherited belief, custom, and prejudice to oppose the spread of so pernicious a heresy” (Gertrude 39). As in *Half the Sky* when women in the Middle East were educated, many gangs that accumulated women to use as sex slaves would stay away because education meant

power (Kristof & Wudunn 49). Many forms of education reiterate the deeply rooted ideology that women have been subservient to men and Maria Irene Fornes's play is no different. In order to learn and shift the hegemonic view one must understand the history upon which it was based. McManus demonstrates how this is done both advantageously if the reader extracts the deeper meaning and disadvantageously where the reader does not learn from the reading and instead is drawn into the story and not to extract from it the ultimate theme. She states:

When a text cloaks a female character in a mantle of feminine virtue, it anchors her as an
 object of our sympathy. We "should" empathize with her because she epitomizes those
 norms, like compassion and selflessness, that we, again, should recognize as our own.
 Sympathy thus acts as a bridge between character and reader, whose belonging to an
 imagined community of ethical subjects is strengthened through the experience of
 narrative. (McManus 81)

Women who do read and identify with female characters should be able to embody this sympathetic mind frame and better understand the world from how the author wishes the reader to understand it and recognize and analyze the underlying message. Leticia and Nena's adversity is the perfect story to identify with and create that bridge from reader to sorrowful character. Once the reader delves deeper he or she can strengthen their ethical knowledge of the world. Men too can sympathize with female characters and understand the author's intentions.

Underlying themes in *The Conduct of Life* demonstrate how difficult it is for women to gain a foothold in culture's deeply rooted beliefs that men hold the power and make the rules. This includes how women are to remain home to cook, clean, and take care of children because men will not grant them the education for them to

make a living for themselves. Without this education women cannot have a say in what rules and laws should be abided by because without an education women cannot enter the political domain. This vulnerability makes it easy for men to control women who do not understand they are entitled to rights as well. Change will only come if women stand together to change this cultural hegemonic force.

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